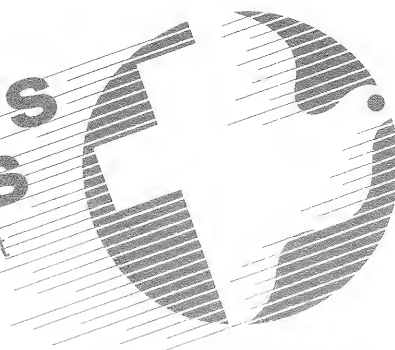


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# Women's Concerns

Report



## Forgiveness: Stories of redemption and healing

This morning I cried. Not about any one thing in particular but about many things. I cried about losses I have experienced and losses I have witnessed. I cried for hurts in the lives of my family, friends and co-workers. I cried remembering betrayals I have experienced and betrayals I have perpetrated. I cried for relationships I have lost. I also cried remembering acts of grace and generosity—times when my spirit was touched.

Compiling this issue on forgiveness has been personally challenging. I thought I would examine forgiveness from a more academic perspective, exploring what forgiveness is and is not. I would, I thought, allow the other contributors to do the storytelling. But I found I couldn't just focus on the theories because my life kept getting in the way. So this morning I cried.

Working on this issue has been a time of remembering or, perhaps, re-mem-bering the lessons I learned and am still learning about forgiveness. As I read the contributors' stories, I am realizing how much I still need to learn. I am also challenged to return to situations where I have more work to do, even though this means feeling some wounds I would prefer to have lie dormant.

I remember the ways in which I learned about forgiveness. As a child, I was taught when someone says "sorry," you forgive them. When you've done something wrong, you need to say "sorry" and ask for forgiveness. The other person, of course, would know to grant forgiveness. As an adult, I believe that's a formula for pretending nothing happened, returning things to how they were before.

As I grew up, things became less straightforward. Sometimes it's hard to say sorry. Sometimes the other person doesn't respond either as I want them to or at all. Sometimes I don't want to forgive, preferring to hang on to my feelings of hurt and anger. Sometimes relationships just can't be restored.

When I began to work with women who had been abused by their partners, I saw times when teachings of forgiveness were used to allow the abuse to continue. That observation shook a part of my theological foundation. I remember a pastor telling a woman in the shelter where I worked, "God has forgiven your husband and he [meaning God] wants you to, too." That same night, the woman and her children returned to the husband who, only days earlier, had held a gun to her head. Somehow, I could not believe this was what God had intended. I saw that while our teachings on forgiveness had brought freedom to some, they had also been used to oppress others.

When I started working with Voices for Non-Violence, I was grateful for the opportunity to enhance my understanding of forgiveness, to give it more depth than simply a recitation of what I was taught mixed with gut instinct. Helping churches respond to abuse within their communities required a deeper understanding of some Mennonite teachings.

So I looked again at what forgiveness means. While I didn't necessarily throw out earlier teachings, I increased my understanding of their complexities. I learned that forgiveness is a process, a journey



we each make at our own pace. I discovered that the adage "forgive and forget" can be dangerous when it doesn't allow us to learn what we need to learn. I was reminded that forgiveness requires acknowledging what has happened, honoring our pain.

I found that sometimes we forgive the same offense many times. I gained a greater understanding of the role of power in the process of forgiveness. I discovered that the Bible speaks much more frequently about being forgiven than about forgiving. And I learned that there is no unanimous understanding in the theological community about what forgiveness involves.

I gained some answers, accompanied by new questions and complexities. So I look around me, and within me, to learn more.

I am a person who watches TV and reads fiction, focusing lately on mystery novels. I watch and read stories of anger, hurt, retribution and revenge. In some stories, accountability is present but alone, without mercy. Others are stories of renewal, reconciliation, restoration. Some stories make me cry as I witness the generosity of the human spirit. All these stories, though many are fiction, are part of the folklore of our society, reflecting our values and mores.

From the folklore around us, I see lessons I want to learn and lessons that bring further pain. Some teachings have pressured people into premature forgiveness, increasing their pain and feelings of being violated. Other teachings encourage a quick and easy forgiveness without accountability, interfering in the healing of those who cause injury. The stories I want to learn from are the stories of redemption and healing; the stories, if you will, of miracles.

I believe that forgiveness is about remembering what happened and accessing grace. When I've been hurt, forgiveness is accessing the grace to heal. I acknowledge my pain. Carter Heyward says, "To forgive is not to forget, but rather to re-member whatever has been disremembered." Grace allows me to re-member and to heal. This issue tells such stories of grace.

At the suggestion of a friend, I recently tried to picture what forgiveness looks like. I pictured two images, almost simultaneously. The first was simply a picture of darkness. It seemed to be an image of pain, an image of a living struggle. The second was similar to a picture my sister painted for me several years ago—a figure with light emanating from within; nothing blocked or interfered with the light.

These two images together reflect my understanding of forgiveness. Forgiveness is acknowledging our pain, crying and struggling with it. Forgiveness is also being cleansed, being made whole again.

When I am forgiven by someone, it is an act of grace. I feel relief that they have not equated me with my actions; that they have not written me off. I am in awe that the one I've hurt can forgive me. I recognize what I have done and try to accept the grace extended. At times I don't even know that the gift was extended, not realizing that I had caused harm. Other times, I am more likely to remember that I need forgiving than that I was forgiven. Forgiving myself for hurting another, for making mistakes, for having limits, or simply for being human is a grace I often find hard to access.

When I am forgiven by God, I am humbled by this act of grace, this great compassion. I am made clean. It is a gift I cannot demand but which I want to receive. And for which I am grateful.

—Heather Block, compiler

*The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all (2 Cor. 13:14).*

**After seven years with Voices for Non-Violence, Heather Block has taken a position as director of a Winnipeg nonprofit counseling agency. She finds joy in her friends, house and garden, and her niece and nephews.**

**"I need to reclaim my freedom  
by choosing to forgive again,  
to reinterpret that history  
through forgiveness."**

by Naomi Kauffman Lederach

## To forgive or not to forgive?

We were sitting with friends one evening in Belfast, listening as we often did to the recounting of painful events of "The Troubles," as the last 30 years of Irish history are called. "I will never forgive them for what they did to us," one woman stated. "How can I, when they killed my husband and burned us out of our home where we lived for years?"

Another said, with some sadness, "I would like to forgive, like Gordon Wilson did, but I don't even know where to begin."

### A forgiving spirit

Gordon Wilson was a well-known and respected member of Parliament. In October 1993, his daughter, along with a number of others, was killed when a bomb exploded at a fish shop on the Shankill. He heard about the explosion and, knowing his daughter was there, went immediately to see what had happened. He found that she was critically injured, but he was able to hold her as she died. Shortly thereafter, Wilson publicly declared that he was forgiving those who killed his daughter. He pled with others not to retaliate in any way and lived out this forgiving spirit until his death a few years later.

### Forgiveness and inner growth

"It was too much to think of forgiving all at once," one woman said to me as she spoke of the hurts she had experienced over the years with her husband. "So, I made a list and named specific times and incidents, starting with the smaller ones

where I felt betrayed or put down or hurt. Sometimes it was only a word that reminded me of the devastation and damage I had felt. The list was quite long, and it took a while to compose it. Then I started praying, asking God to give me strength and courage to do what I knew would move me toward healing. I named the hurts, one by one, and each time said, 'I now release my judgment of you for the pain you caused me' or 'I choose to forgive you for this hurt.'

"Sometimes I would get stuck with one especially damaging incident. So I would take all the time I needed to let go of that one, sometimes days or even longer. Only when I was ready would I go on to the next. It's been a long process. Sometimes, for whatever reason, I am reminded of some of those same old hurts. I need to reclaim my freedom by choosing to forgive again, to reinterpret that history through forgiveness. It has gotten easier. The pain is not so bitter, and I am in charge."

### Forgiveness—70 x 7

Perhaps this woman's description of forgiving her husband is what Jesus meant when he said we are to forgive seventy times seven. It may not be new hurts or wounds, but it may be the same old ones that keep coming back. For me this is true.

Years ago when I had surgery, the surgeon made a serious error. I was devastated, and it took almost two years for me to become aware that my anger toward him was destroying me. It dominated my thinking. I was stuck



**"Remembering is the very  
basis for forgiving."**

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with my hurt and anger while the surgeon went on with his life. How could I forgive, as Jesus did, someone who feels no need for forgiveness?

I finally felt strong enough to initiate conversation with him. Although he was a Christian, and I approached him in that spirit, he refused to enter into any dialogue. I had hoped talking to him would bring some closure for me, but he said it was my problem, not his. He wanted to refer me to a psychiatrist.

### **Forgiveness as empowerment**

What I discovered is that truly taking care of myself does not mean that in forgiving I must also forget. Remembering is the very basis for forgiving. It does not mean giving in or giving up. It means getting release from the person and events that wounded me. Choosing to forgive means I can face the losses I experienced, separate myself from the person, and be empowered by letting go of my judgment of him. I can also let go of my desire to retaliate in some way.

I found that in forgiving I took back my whole self, found freedom to heal and no longer felt like a victim. Only then was I truly free. Even so whenever I remember, as I am now doing, I find I can rather easily take back the burden of my hurt. It is much easier and takes much less energy to choose to forgive—again and again. In a matter of seconds or minutes, I can move on and be renewed, empowered and free.

### **Forgiveness as intent**

As illustrated in the earlier vignettes, people forgive in different ways. Timing is different as well. Some are able to forgive "once and done." For many others, the liberation that comes with forgiveness is a process, sometimes lifelong. The important thing is to move in the direction of forgiveness, in terms of intent, acknowledging the hurts, a way of opening rather than closing the issues.

Forgiveness is a choice. It is not helpful to insist that one forgive, especially if we have not taken time to listen carefully, being willing to hear the pain without judgment. It tends to send the message, "What happened to you is of little consequence," which only adds to the hurt.

Redemptive remembering—creating safe places for people to tell their stories—provides a basis for being able to move toward forgiveness.

Very recently, I opened a conversation with a friend who had some difficult experiences when we lived in close proximity many years ago. I invited her to share her story. As she spoke, I became aware that I may have been part of her pain at that time. At my request, she recounted specific words I had spoken and ways I had related to her that hurt her. All these years later, she had clear memories of those events. I had absolutely no recollection of them. I told her how very sorry I was and asked her to forgive me. I was also humbled to learn of hurts I had caused, to realize how often I had been unaware of my own lack of grace, and to remember my own need for accountability and forgiveness.

### **Forgiveness—a risk**

It is a risk to forgive. We become vulnerable, not knowing where forgiveness may take us. What will it mean to forgive the person or persons who so wronged me? Will I not be forgiven if I can't forgive? What will it mean no longer to have my "enemy," a person who may long have helped me define who I am not? What will reconciliation look like? Does it mean I have to be close and friendly? All these questions take us into unknown territory. Answers to questions like these are found, not given.

*"... you are anointed as a peacemaker ... (because God has anointed you to bring glad tidings). You have the power to bring peace into your world. That is enormous power ... when you know this, when you exercise this, you are liberated, and you have made jubilee."*  
(*Forgiving for the Millennium*, Mary Cabrini Durkin and Sheila Durkin Dierks. Boulder, Co.: Woven Word Press, 1998, p. 10)

**Naomi Kauffman Lederach and her husband, John Lederach, served with MCC in Ireland from 1994–1997. Before that, they spent many years working as pastors and counselors. They live in Goshen, Ind.**

**"Initially, forgiveness had a purely selfish feel to it. I didn't have the energy to hate."**

by Russell Plett

## Why I forgave

I guess I forgave so I could survive.

This is the nearest I can come when attempting to explain my journey on this path toward forgiving the person whose choices caused me a great deal of pain and grief.

As I prepared to write about it, I realized that I didn't really know what forgiveness meant. So I looked it up. One definition elaborately stated that to forgive is "to give up the wish to punish or get even with; pardon; excuse; not have hard feelings about or toward." Very academic. Almost stuffy, isn't it?

How had I come not to wish punishment on the person that killed my family? How had I come not to wish to get even with the person who physically injured me and, as a result, caused me to leave my job and my community? This person who never even asked for my forgiveness? This person who, while still in a very drunken state, insisted that the deadly results were God's will?

Initially, forgiveness had a purely selfish feel to it. For my own sake, I didn't wish to carry the bitterness. I didn't have the energy to hate. This repeat-offender and very-drunk-driver had taken the life of my wife and our only child, and I was not going to allow my life to be consumed as well.

This was my choice, my responsibility. I have seen others overcome by hate and refusing to forgive. They are still victims. I did not wish to allow this person to destroy my life as well.

Then there was my wife, Mary-Anne, and our son, Brandon. Mak, as she was nicknamed, was a very loving and forgiving person. Would she want me to forgive this person? If I had been killed, would I want her to forgive my killer? Both answers were yes. Would I have wanted Brandon to withhold grace from his father's killer? (And thereby forego it himself?) Would I have wanted my little BJ to exhaust himself with hatred for the violent offender in his life?

These questions helped me realize the third factor that allowed me to let go of my wish to punish or get even with the abuser in my life—pity. I can in no way condone this person's action. I would not want to trade places with this killer. I did not create and am not creating this killer's personal hell. Nor, I realized, can I create it.

Yes, I continue to go through various stages of grieving, but when I attempt to put myself in the shoes of this pain's instigator, I see only blackness. No light. Often people who initiate such pain cannot ask others for forgiveness. They cannot even confront what they have done within themselves. They are in a darker and deeper hell than I. Mine has moments of joy, mine is less dark than it once was, and mine will continue to brighten, I know.

If I refuse to allow forgiveness, regardless of whether the perpetrator requests it, I am locking myself in the darkness as well. I cannot withhold forgiveness



**"I am surviving despite what I have experienced, and I am attempting to rebuild my life."**

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and expect to feel the full potential of joy that is possible in life. I refuse, therefore, to be irresponsible and remain a victim forever.

I made a determined effort to reclaim my life, the life that I felt dark forces of hate and unforgiveness were attempting to draw away from me. I try to remain faithful to the values that Mak and I were trying to live by and hoped to pass on to BJ. I have heard other parents tell me, "I would rather have my son killed by a drunk driver than to have him kill someone." Whether I forgive the drunk driver seems, to a large degree, irrelevant to him. This person is still refusing to acknowledge the pain that has resulted, a necessary early step toward beginning to forgive oneself.

Have I forgiven my antagonist? I don't know. Forgiveness is not a singular event. But I am surviving despite what I have experienced, and I am attempting to rebuild my life. I could not do that and hold onto the consuming poison of refusing grace, of not forgiving.

**Russell Plett currently lives in Winnipeg, Man., where he is trying his hand at writing. Previously, he taught school in the far North (Broughton Island, N.T.), where he lived with his wife and infant son.**



by Janet P. Schmidt

## Some proverbs and a story

The desire to understand forgiveness is reflected in the many articles, magazines and books that have been written over the last 10 years. I was not exempt from this fascination. As I traveled to Africa to begin an MCC assignment, I wondered what new discoveries from African traditions were in store for me.

Teaching in a Pan-African setting, I asked students to share indigenous proverbs about peace and conflict. Many of these proverbs echoed or expanded my understanding of peace, conflict and forgiveness. Here are a few of the proverbs the students shared with me.

A Ngoni (Zambia) proverb warns, "When you start a fight, know how to end it," reminding us not only to be champions in creating conflicts, but also to be very good at resolving the problems created.

There are several proverbs around the theme of needing others to help us resolve differences. A Hausa (Nigeria) proverb says, "Whenever a child throws an arrow in a shrine, the elders are responsible to go and take it." This teaches us that whenever there is conflict, those who cause the confusion will not settle the dispute themselves. The reconciliation group (leaders) is responsible because they are people of wisdom. In the same vein, a proverb from the Zande (Sudan) proclaims, "One finger cannot kill a louse." In this context, the proverb means one person cannot solve the problem or conflict alone.

**"If you don't mend a crack in a wall, you will eventually have to rebuild the whole wall."  
(Kikuyu and Yao)**

**"The one who pierces may forget, but the pierced one retains." (Muhema)**

A Hutu (Burundi) teaching says, "New meat reminds you of an old one." In other words, if I have done something wrong to you and repeat it again, it reminds you of the last time.

A Muhema (Democratic Republic of Congo) proverb highlights an important aspect of forgiveness. "To forgive someone, it is not necessary to forget the mistake that was done to you." The Muhema people have another one that I really like because it is so true: "The one who pierces may forget, but the pierced one retains." If we are hurt, we remember; if we do the hurting, we forget.

A proverb with a similar message comes from the Bemba (Zambia): "Words cannot be rubbed (erased)." We often hear hurtful words repeated over and over in our heads.

There are also some lighter comments. For example, the Mukiga (Uganda) have an interesting proverb that says, "Those who stay together cannot do so without gassing each other." I don't think this needs any further explanation.

A Kikuyu (Kenya) and Yao (Tanzania) proverb reminds us of something that we all too often forget. "If you don't mend a crack in a wall, you will eventually have to rebuild the whole wall." Whatever you do, don't ignore those small cracks in a relationship because you may end up breaking the relationship and needing to start from the beginning. In case you thought you could run away from the situation, a Lugbara (Uganda) proverb says, "Mountains don't meet with mountains, but human beings will always meet." Running is usually only a temporary solution.

The Maragoli (Kenya) remind us that forgiveness is a process when they say, "Constant dripping wears the stone." One of my students explained that a gradual approach to issues brings reconciliation and understanding.

Father Carlos Matsinhe from Mozambique reflected in his paper, "The African Concept of Forgiveness, Pardon and Reconciliation," that forgiveness is a costly gift for both the giver and the receiver. The question is what do we pay if we don't get involved in this gift exchange. Let me share a story to illustrate this theme.

The story is set in Lesotho. In the late 1850s, there was much chaos in Southern Africa. Periodic fighting erupted among the various people who lived there. The turmoil caused major food shortages. Starvation was a real problem for many groups, and some resorted to cannibalism in order to survive.

During this time of great struggle, Chief Moshoeshoe decided to move his people to the relative safety of the highlands. As he moved with his people, their caravan was attacked from behind and a number of the stragglers were taken for food, including the chief's grandfather and grandmother. Chief Moshoeshoe sent out his warriors to capture the cannibals with the explicit instructions to bring them to him unharmed.

During the search, the chief and his people prepared a feast in anticipation of the capture. When the warriors and their captives arrived, Chief Moshoeshoe placed his prisoners at the head of the feast as honored guests.

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"The spirit is shrouded in 'I'm sorry,' 'It's all my fault' and 'I shouldn't have done that.'"

After the feast, the chief rose to speak to his people and to his grandparents' killers. He proceeded to offer a field, a cow and a house to every member of the group who had killed his grandparents. He said, "Now you have no reason to practice cannibalism. Since you are the grave of my ancestors, you belong among us."

His was an act of forgiveness that cost and gave something to everyone involved.

**Janet P. Schmidt assisted in the development of a nine-month diploma course in Peace Building and Conflict Transformation at a Pan-African ecumenical center in Kitwe, Zambia. She plans to return to Winnipeg, Man., in November 1999.**

by Anita Schroeder King

## Who will listen to the stories?

"Say you're sorry. C'mon! Say *sorry*."

A well-meaning but exasperated parent, trying to end conflict, forces the word out of the child's mouth. She mumbles "sorry" but in her heart she cries out in truthful anger, "But I did nothing wrong!"

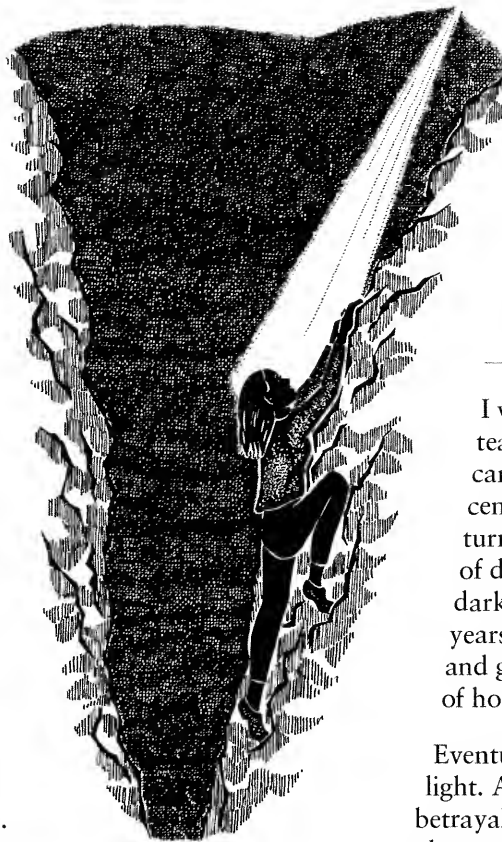
The child grows and encounters conflict again and again, and the sorry's come thicker and faster until soon they obliterate the truthful anger. The spirit is shrouded in "I'm sorry," "It's all my fault" and "I shouldn't have done that."

Every so often someone comes along and suggests that she needs forgiveness. Forgiveness for what? What did she do that was so terrible? All those *sorry*'s were for what? Was it just for being born? You see, according to the religion of her community, she was born bad, born a sinner. There was, she learned, a poison—sin—with an antidote—forgiveness.

But what if a baby isn't a sinner when she's born? What if she is pure, perfect love? What if all there is, is Love? What if when the child grows and encounters conflict, she is forced to say sorry when she's really not sorry? What if she's taught to believe things that aren't true? What if she's taught that adults always know best and must be respected and obeyed without







question? What if she's taught to do as she's told, to be nice and to be quiet? And slowly—no, quickly—she forgets that her God-heart-soul is pure? And she forgets how to love and respect herself.

Then one day someone comes along who makes her feel like she matters, makes her feel loved. He asks her to sing instead of say "I'm sorry." He listens to her. He smiles at her. He's an adult, and she respects him. He's a church leader, and she looks up to him. He teaches music, and music makes her feel close to God. And she does whatever he says.

Then one night he does something terrible. He takes her to a dark, cold empty place and forces his body into hers. And the singing stops.

That feels like sin, like poison. She feels shock and then numbness. Whose sin is it? Should she say "sorry"? Was it her fault? Should he say "sorry"? And what about forgiveness? Who should forgive whom? Wouldn't saying sorry neutralize the poison? Wouldn't forgiveness make everything okay again?

When can we talk about forgiveness? Only after the story is told. Perhaps told many times over and over in all its terrible details. There are many details and many stories and many women. They need to be listened to; they need to be heard; they need to be understood.

Who will listen to the stories, repulsive and disgusting as they are? Whether they are heard or not, the stories are there. The women are there, trapped with stories untold because of denial and disbelief. Things happened, terrible things. Souls were wounded, one by one, year after year. The same story in so many different ways.

I was 17 years old when my music teacher betrayed and raped me in a car on a deserted winter road. An innocent, curious, shy girl whose world turned upside down and became a pit of despair. A pit that was so deep, so dark and so slippery it took another 17 years to fight my way out, often stumbling and groping, but occasionally seeing a ray of hope.

Eventually, the Truth began to come to light. After a lifetime of perpetrating abuse, betrayal and deceit, the molester was caught and exposed. Finally, the time had come for me to tell my story. Many people listened. They believed me and reminded me, "It's not your fault."

Loving, compassionate people were willing to look and to listen, to shed the light of hope on my path, leading me out of that dark, lonely place. They did what I believed was impossible—they looked through the prestige and respect the abuser enjoyed for over 40 years in his school, church and music community. They looked beyond the adoration of his students. They dared to question the staunch belief that he was invincible. They had the courage to sacrifice some of their own shared history. They had the courage to look closely at what looked like a rock solid foundation and saw, instead, a prison wall made of secrecy and deceit.

Of all the people who heaved that sigh of agony, who heaved those great stones of impossibility away, the person who made it possible for me to begin to heal was me. I had to be willing to listen to my deepest heart. The heart that said, "I did nothing wrong." The heart that was buried and forgotten under too many layers of "I'm sorry." I had to remember. And I do.

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**"Of all the people who heaved  
that sigh of agony, who heaved  
those great stones of impos-  
sibility away, the person who  
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I remember that 17-year-old. Her heart was pure. I am forgiving myself for hating her. I no longer blame her for being vulnerable and for being too naive to protect herself against his poison. I am learning to love that 17-year-old that I once was. Learning to love and, yes, also forgiving.

Webster's Dictionary defines forgiveness as "giving up resentment against or the desire to punish; to stop being angry with; pardon; to give up all claim to punish or exact penalty."

I am learning to let go of the self-hate and choose compassion instead. Forgiving myself and loving myself is my work now. As a friend of mine lovingly reminds me, once you put down the big stick with which you beat yourself, you'll also be free to love others.

What about the man who raped me? Don't I have to forgive him? No. Not now. I don't know when. Not while there are still women whose stories haven't been heard. Not while those who deny his crimes fortify his feet of clay with boulders of hate, blame and fear. No. My forgiveness is between myself and my God-heart-soul. And his is between him and his.

**Anita Schroeder King grew up in the Altona area of Manitoba. She lives in Winnipeg with her husband and two children. She struggles to live an exploring, forgiving and healing life everyday.**



by Donna Stewart

## Switchback to a higher point

All of us probably have a grievance tucked away in a mental cupboard, ready to spill out at an inappropriate time. No wonder Paul instructed us to deal with those things before sundown! Otherwise, they burrow in like ticks, sometimes taking up permanent residence and poisoning our attitudes and dispositions.

Our pastors and well-meaning friends are on good biblical grounds when they counsel forgiveness, though they ought, in fairness, to stress Matthew 18:15 as well. Some commentators insist that this passage refers to some public sin and not a private grievance. The parallel passage in Luke 17:4 makes it quite clear that a personal problem is involved, and since Ephesians 4:25 says, "Then throw off falsehood; speak the truth to each other," I accept the broader translation. We Mennonites are singularly bad when it comes to confronting the person with whom we have a grievance, and our failure to do so often compounds the grievance.

Sometimes we hide our grievances even from ourselves, waiting until a memory surfaces. "Did she really mean that? That's terrible." Or sometimes the grievance rises from often-repeated sins against us, sins that we cannot rebuke because of a power differential between the offender and us. Forgiveness in such cases involves a process that may take months or even years.

The two books on forgiveness that I most recommend for laypersons are David Augsburger's quirky two-sided *Caring Enough to Not Forgive*, backed by *Caring Enough*

**"Women often have years of practice in hiding their feelings from themselves, from others, from God, so it may take us awhile to bring things to consciousness."**

**"Sometimes we don't even let ourselves know we have a grievance until after the fact."**

*to Forgive, and Don't Forgive Too Soon: Extending the Two Hands That Heal* by Dennis, Sheila and Matthew Linn.

I have given Augsburg's book to many people, simply for its recognition that there is no healing in denial and pretense, the self-defeating strategies that most of us choose when faced with the difficult task of obeying Matthew 18:15. Augsburg exposes our second choice, the too quick, too virtuous "false forgiveness" as a way to put the other person in the conflict in a permanent debtor position. Another death-oriented strategy.

This book has an excellent exercise which I recommend to anyone who is trying to process a mix of confusing emotions. On page 49 of the "Not Forgive" half of the book, Augsburg suggests that a person having difficulty with forgiveness write down all the feelings s/he is working with, then look for the thought or attitude underneath the feeling. Some of the thoughts will turn out to be invalid: "I will only forgive when I'm absolutely sure that it will never happen again." (No one, regardless of good intentions, can absolutely guarantee the future.) Some of the thoughts will expose sinful attitudes: "I don't deserve to be treated that way." (Probably nobody does, but am I really such a superior creature?)

At the end of the exercise, having given up the invalid and sinful attitudes, we are left with legitimate grievances which we can take to the offender secure in the knowledge that these are the bedrock problems that we need to think about together. This exercise can take us past denial and blaming to the core of a disagreement or conflict. However, it does require clarity about what we are feeling and why.

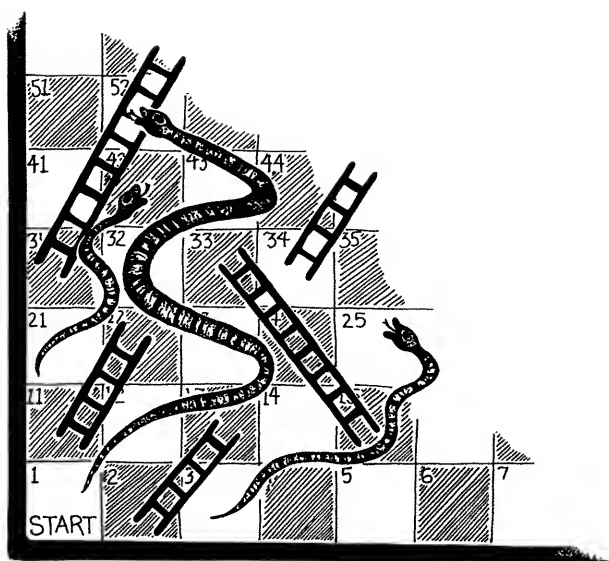
Women often have years of practice hiding their feelings from themselves, from others, from God. So it may take us awhile to bring things to consciousness. On one occasion in my life, a family relationship became so strained and so complex that it took me 14 years of prayer to come to the core of the problem. If I had known about not letting the sun go down, or if I had known this exercise, we might have saved all those years of strain. If we ask, God will help us and give us the absolute honesty required by this exercise.

The Linn book I value for its recognition that anger is a gift from God, intended to help us understand and value ourselves as well as the other person in a conflict situation. As Mennonites we often think that anger itself is wrong. We hasten to deny it or suppress it with disastrous consequences for our mental health. "Stay with your anger until you've learned all that God wants to teach you through it," the Linns advise.

Their book, illustrated by Francisco Miranda, looks at first like a junior high health manual. Still, it's grounded solidly in Scripture and orthodox theology. Despite its juvenile appearance, it is the kind of book one can go back to, again and again, without coming to the end of its wisdom. I've given it to a number of friends.

Both books recognize that forgiving is often a process. As a result, we might expect to progress from stage one to stage five just as we pass through the grades in school. It doesn't work like that. It's much more like a highway





**"Who in my circle of friends, in my community, would be in need of release from bondage? Who are the slaves in my setting?"**

by Karen Schlichting

## Jubilee and forgiveness

*Note from compiler: When I was first asked to compile this issue, it immediately seemed fitting that the topic of forgiveness close out the 1900s. I was intrigued by the possible connections between the Year of Jubilee and forgiveness and wanted to discuss this further. Karen Schlichting works for MCC Manitoba, promoting the Year of Jubilee. I met with Karen to discuss what we can learn about forgiveness from the work she is doing.* —H.B.

**H:** *What is the Year of Jubilee?*

**K:** The concept of the Year of Jubilee came from Leviticus 25—the idea of sort of a Super Sabbath. It's like the Sabbath—a time of rest, of not working, a connection to and realization that we are dependent on God, not on ourselves. The Sabbath year was every seventh year. At that time debts were to be canceled, and land was to be left fallow. It was an expansion of the seventh day rest, but it was also a time when people could start off on a fresh note. In order for there to be community or relationships that actually functioned and where people could look at each other, those types of economic shifts had to happen. This related to debt cancellation and also letting the land lie fallow. When this happened, everyone was relatively on the same ground. They could start things fresh.

The Jubilee Year happened every 49 or 50 years. It was a more radical step in that it espoused not only debt cancellation, freeing of slaves and letting the land lie fallow, but it also included returning land to its original owners. The assumption was that everyone had land to begin with then inequality set in, creating an imbalance. The Year of Jubilee realigned land ownership, once again balancing the power.

**H:** *In your position, what are you working toward with the Year of Jubilee? What are you encouraging people to do?*

switchback where we come back to a view we've seen before but at a higher point, perhaps with more understanding and a little less pain.

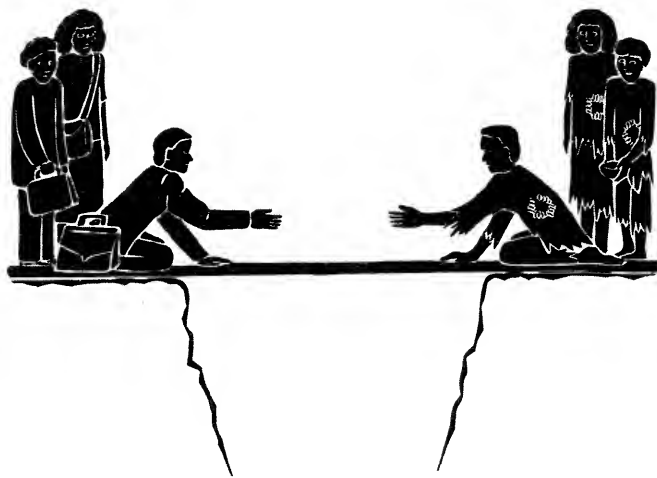
Sometimes action is required. We may have to do some backtracking before we can continue our God-ordained journey. At times the process feels like the Canadian game called Snakes and Ladders, with sudden unexpected slides "right back to the beginning," but it only seems that way. In reality, the painfully gained insights have not been lost.

We can, of course, refuse to set out, preferring to live with the pain we know rather than open ourselves to the possibility of a difficult new perspective. For some people, looking inside is an unfamiliar and frightening experience because we have a perfectly justified fear that we will learn something about ourselves we'd rather not know. Recollection and self-examination can open up old wounds we have pretended were healed. Like lancing a boil, it takes courage.

It helps if we are sure that God is a God of healing who loves us, who will erase old sin without blotting out new self-knowledge. God will set our feet in a new path, where we will be both more humble and more confident.

*After the night of weeping, joy comes in the morning.*  
(Psalm 30:5)

**Donna Stewart, a Mennonite by conviction, is a member of the Killarney Park Mennonite Brethren Church in B.C. She is an editor and adult educator.**



**K:** Well, there's the Jubilee Initiative, which is a Canadian initiative. It has three different three-year themes. The first theme is releasing those in bondage, looking at who the modern-day slaves are. While working on this theme, people focused their education on examining economic realities, including third-world debt. The crisis of debt in a lot of developing countries is holding many people in economic bondage. So the year 2000 is a natural year when people of the world can rally and actually make a significant contribution. Jubilee is also a year of celebration. It's not a mournful kind of "Oh, I have to give up all my things" year.

Another part of the focus on releasing those in bondage involves issues of sweatshop labor. We're encouraging people to look at consumption patterns. As North Americans, we're dependent, although we may not acknowledge it, on slave labor. We're encouraging people to look at how to get off that dependency.

The second theme, which we're beginning in Fall 1999, is the redistribution of wealth. That's where we start tapping the whole concept of giving land back to its original owners. How do you really shift the power imbalances in our economic system and in our churches? How do we redistribute wealth? Even just talking about this sends up huge red flags. People think communism and ask, "What are you espousing? What are you trying to accomplish?" In Leviticus the people were probably so aware that this type of activity needed to happen, that it happened every seven years and then every 50 years. We haven't had anything similar in our religious tradition. We haven't had any corrective to economic imbalances.

The third theme is renewal of the land. Currently, we've focused this theme on campaigns—environmental campaigns, abolition of nuclear weapons, water conditions, pollution—but it could mean many things. I could see that being more personal when you look at how do we let land lie fallow? How do we let go of our jobs which we're so dependent on, or of our financial scenarios? How do we trust and just let it go?

**H:** *How does the concept of the Year of Jubilee relate to forgiveness? Is it a form of forgiveness?*

**K:** In the Leviticus passages, those who are owed money are asked to forgive those who owe money—so those who have power are to let it go. Forgiveness is obviously not just a one-way sort of activity.

**H:** *In thinking about this connection, I was remembering an article by Frederick Keene [see resources list on p. 15]. He writes about forgiveness and how in biblical times only people with power forgave people who didn't have power. So a person could forgive someone who had less power. In this context, Keene also says it's impossible for a person without power to forgive someone with power.*

**K:** Are you saying those who don't have power can't forgive?

**H:** *That's what Keene would say. He wrote in the context of abuse and basically was saying that we keep telling people who don't have power to forgive. Keene says that they don't have to. He says he initially saw it as meaning those with power must give it up or have it taken away. Marie Fortune's response to him was that justice-making was critical—including the empowerment of the one who has been hurt. This connects with some of the things you were talking about with redistributing power.*

**K:** Yes, forgiveness is a tricky thing. It's so personal. But I would imagine then that economic forgiveness or debt forgiveness was strongly tied to the freeing of slaves. At that time people were slaves because they had gotten into so much debt. When their debt was forgiven, they were freed. Forgiveness wouldn't have been called for on the part of the slave. It's more about the powerful relinquishing power, which may enable or empower those who are powerless.

I haven't seen forgiveness as a big component of the Year of Jubilee, but recently I read *Proclaim Jubilee* by Maria Harris. She talks a lot about forgiveness and Jubilee. She translates debt forgiveness into a whole lifestyle of forgiveness, realizing that forgiveness is not easy and may take years. She points out how 50 years after Hiroshima all

**"Maybe the 50-year period is significant. When huge abuses or atrocities happen, it may take that long for people to ask forgiveness or to forgive."**

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these apologies are coming out. It takes a long time to say you're sorry. Harris makes the connection to the Year of Jubilee teaching, suggesting maybe the 50-year period is significant. When huge abuses or atrocities happen, it may take that long for people to ask forgiveness or to forgive.

Maybe I have had a hard time seeing the Jubilee Year being connected to forgiveness because I see forgiveness as a two-way street. It's not something one person or one party does. If I see forgiveness as something equal happening—somebody says "I'm sorry" or cancels something—then the other person is brought up to the level where each can look at the other equally. If that's forgiveness, then I see that as being integral to the whole Jubilee concept. I mean, that's really what Jubilee is all about. It's a way of bridging the gap between the rich and the poor, bringing those who have power together with those who do not have power. It's a way to do what Christ did where he brought the rich people together with the poor, made them see each other, face each other, and live together.

**H:** *Do you want to say more about the role of power, either letting go of power or giving power in the Year of Jubilee?*

**K:** Yes, maybe by saying again that Jubilee is about celebration. There can be a lot of joy in letting go of power and control. There can also be a lot of joy in gaining power, gaining recognition, gaining place. You don't see it very often, but it can work if it's a real letting go, if you really fully understand why and if there's a community to help do it. Jubilee is based on community. That's part of the reason I'm having difficulty connecting it to the personal because it's so connected to groups of people living together.

**H:** *Which may speak to one of the flaws in how we understand forgiveness—that forgiveness is just between one other person and me. We also need to look at the impact on the community of violation, repentance and forgiveness. What comes to mind if you think about a personal Year of Jubilee, if we say personal does not necessarily mean being alone?*

**K:** I think I would ask several questions. Who in my circle of friends, in my community, would be in need of release from bondage? Who are the slaves in my setting? It could mean an overt attempt to empower people like my mother

who perpetually is the one organizing everybody or getting things together. It may be a stretch to call that slave-like activity, but it is an unrecognized or unappreciated role. Then there's our community, looking at those who are kind of out of it, or it could be a whole bunch of people, depending who your community is. For me it may mean including to a greater degree those people who are on the edge. It may mean those who are poor, but it may also mean those who are wealthy—trying at least to give them more grace than I've given them. It could be very difficult to let those people in. At the community level or at the church level, it's looking at who's been left out or bound—continuing to do more work with women and working to include people who have been on the edges, such as the gay/lesbian community or the people in poverty in our churches. That, I think, would be a fairly obvious letting in as opposed to releasing slaves, but it would be freeing people who want to be involved. Sort of a release from exclusion.

When people do Bible studies on the Leviticus teaching of forgiveness of debts or even the Lord's Prayer, there could be the concept of freeing people from real live debt. Someone may owe me money personally. If I'm holding power over somebody because of the money they owe me, I think it would be a healthy spiritual discipline to let go of that debt.

**H:** *What impact would a personal Year of Jubilee have on one's faith?*

**K:** It's a good question. Now that we're talking about it, I think it would make a significant connection to faith—or building of a faith community. If you're going to try to do these things, it's not going to be easy. You need to rely on other people, and I think that's where faith gets strengthened. Maybe some sort of salvation is connected to acts like this as individuals and as communities. Theoretically, it's a very spiritual experience.

**Karen Schlichting works for MCC Manitoba on the Jubilee Initiative, an ecumenical economic justice initiative. She lives in community with her spouse, Aiden Enns, and two other women in Winnipeg.**

#### Women in ministry

**Faith Fowler** was affirmed as associate pastor of youth at Washington Community Fellowship, Washington, D.C.

In January 2000, **Miriam F. Book** will begin as associate pastor at Salford Mennonite Church, Harleysville, Pa.

**Linda Ewert** recently began as director of ministry development at Hope Mennonite Church, North Newton, Ks.

compiled by Heather Block

## Recommended resources on forgiveness

*After Sexual Abuse.* Video. Akron, PA.: Mennonite Central Committee, 1992.

Augsburger, David. *Caring Enough to Not Forgive: False Forgiveness and Caring Enough to Forgive: True Forgiveness.* Scottsdale, Pa., and Kitchener, Ont.: Herald Press, 1981.

Block, Heather. "Two Paths of Healing & Their Intersection," *Advocacy Training Manual: Advocating for Survivors of Sexual Abuse by a Church Leader/Caregiver.* Winnipeg, Man.: Mennonite Central Committee Canada, 1996.

Harris, Maria. *Proclaim Jubilee! A Spirituality for the Twenty-first Century.* Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/ John Knox Press, 1996.

Heggen, Carolyn Holderread. *Sexual Abuse in Christian Homes and Churches.* Scottsdale, Pa., and Waterloo, Ont.: Herald Press, 1993.

Keene, Frederick W. "The Politics of Forgiveness," *Working Together to Prevent Sexual and Domestic Violence*, Vol. 16, No.1, Fall 1995. Seattle, Wash.: Center for the Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence.

Linn, Dennis, Sheila Linn and Matthew Linn. *Don't Forgive Too Soon: Extending the Two Hands that Heal.* Mahwah, N.Y.: Paulist Press, 1997.

Simon, Sidney B., and Suzanne Simon. *Forgiveness: How to Make Peace with Your Past and Get on with Your Life.* New York: Warner Books, 1990.

Smedes, Lewis B. *Forgive and Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don't Deserve.* New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1984.

## News and verbs

- In the new Mennonite Women Bible study guide, *Walking in Love*, Karen Martens Zimmerly observes, "Sometimes we think that being one means being the same or acting the same, but oneness can also convey the sense of completeness and wholeness."

A pastor at Grace Mennonite Church in Regina, Sask., Zimmerly illustrates her lessons on Ephesians with stories from her congregation. *Walking in Love* is the first part of a two-year series on the theme, "One Body, One Spirit." Next year's study will focus on the book of Nehemiah.

This 11-lesson women's Bible study guide is available for \$4 U.S./\$5 Cdn. Contact the Mennonite Women office at 722 Main St., P.O. Box 347, Newton, KS 67114; phone (316) 283-5100; email <mw@gcmc.org>.

- **Anne Stuckey**, minister of congregational resources at Mennonite Board of Missions, recently compiled the following information. Of the 3900 names in the ministerial database of Mennonite Church Canada and Mennonite Church USA, there are 374 women with credentials, which is 9.5 percent. Other denominations who ordain women currently have an average of 12 percent.

### Correction

Our July–August 1999 *Women's Concerns Report* generated some unexpected laughter in the Indiana-Michigan conference offices. One of our *Women in ministry* notes identified Chris Birky as a woman recently ordained at Hopewell Mennonite Church, Kouts, Ind. It was a case of mistaken identity; Chris Birky is a man.

WOMEN'S CONCERNS REPORT is published bimonthly by the MCC Committees on Women's Concerns. We believe that Jesus Christ teaches equality of all persons. By sharing information and ideas, the committees strive to promote new relationships and corresponding supporting structures through which women and men can grow toward wholeness and mutuality. Articles and views presented in REPORT do not necessarily reflect official positions of the Committees on Women's Concerns.

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## New book

*Victim to Survivor: Women Recovering from Clergy Sexual Abuse* (The Pilgrim Press, 1999), edited by Nancy Poling, foreword by Marie Fortune, tells the stories of six women who experienced sexual abuse at the hands of clergy. The project began in August 1997 and was completed in February 1999. To obtain a copy, call The Pilgrim Press (800-654-5129) or request a copy at your local bookstore.

## Letters to the Editor

The Women's Concerns desk would love to hear from you. What are your concerns? What do you wish we would write about? What do you enjoy most about *Women's Concerns Report*? What suggestions do you have for improving the magazine? Please email us at <lstoltzfus@mccus.org> or send your correspondence by regular post to the address on our masthead. If for any reason you don't want us to print your letter, please be sure to tell us.

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